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James Riding, *The Geopolitics of Memory: A Journey to Bosnia*, Stuttgart: ibidem-Verlag, 2019, 192 pp. 978-3838213118, \$30.00 (paperback)

## Politics, feminist geopolitics and aesthetics

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In *The Sight of Death* art historian T. J. Clark (2006) gives an account of daily visits to the Getty Institute in Los Angeles to observe two paintings by Nicolas Poussin: *Landscape with a Calm* and *Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake*. Clark’s book – ostensibly stimulated by the fortune of both paintings hanging in the same gallery – is organised as a set of diary entries and its purpose is at once prosaic and experimental. At first glance the book is an act of aesthetic description but lurking beneath is a deeper current of philosophical and political commentary. It charts a journey ‘outwards’, to the gallery and to describe the paintings’ juxtaposed existence, where the nature of the artworks themselves and their

changing qualities in the shifting light are all meticulously documented. But the book is also a journey ‘inwards’, where Clark is drawing on the paintings to reflect on his own status and purpose, threading together artistic observations with wider political and psychological analysis.

While it is not a direct influence – though there are citations of one of Clark’s concurrent projects with the San Francisco-based collective RETORT (2006) – echoes of Clark’s approach reverberate in James Riding’s (2019) *The Geopolitics of Memory A Journey to Bosnia*. It is a book that similarly seeks to utilise an experimental method, describing observations in a central square in Sarajevo made over repeated visits across 2 years, while connecting these descriptions to a wider set of experiences and journeys within the former Yugoslavia. Inspired by French novelist, essayist and thinker Georges Perec, Riding is seeking to document the everyday life of the city – what Perec terms the ‘infra-ordinary’ – in order to break from representations framed in relation to Sarajevo’s traumatic past (pp. 28–29). The flow of the book is, then, interspersed with lists of observations taken from a central square in Sarajevo (Trg oslobođenja – Alija Izetbegović), avoiding analysis or inference to provide a direct account of

events in public space. This process is experimental and draws in an unusual set of bodies and materials into the discussion, certainly aspects of Sarajevo life that are not the traditional focus of geopolitical analysis. These observations are fused with an exploratory imperative drawn from the travel writings of Arthur J. Evans, in particular his 1876 text *Through Bosnia and the Herzegovina on Foot*. The litany of ephemera in Sarajevo is loosely connected to wider travel experiences, probing issues of political participation, commemoration and trauma in the former Yugoslavia.

Considering the entanglement of literary inspirations and writing styles, the final product defies easy classification: it strays across genres, weaving poetry, art and photography into more traditionally academic prose. It uses travelogue, observation and synthesis of previous writings to achieve a rather humble aim 'I want to give over a sense of what Bosnia is really like' (p. 13). In writing this objective there is a sense that the 'real' has been lost in representations of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), that analysis has become captured by discourses of ethnic tensions and grand geopolitical strategy, where the country can only be understood through the lens of violence. Challenging such imaginaries has been a central spar of critical writing on BiH for some time, reminding readers (as Riding does) of the seminal work by Gearóid Ó Tuathail (1996) on the 'anti-geopolitical eye' or David Campbell's (1999) illumination of the 'apartheid cartography' of the war-ending Dayton General Framework Agreement for Peace. Riding's distinctive contribution is to orientate this critical analysis around memory and place, where commemorative practices can both stabilise and unsettle narratives of the past. Perhaps curiously considering the relatively long intellectual tradition within which this work is embedded, in the book's later chapters Riding calls for a 'new' form of geopolitics (p. 179) that illuminates an incomplete and fragmented account foregrounding human experience, existence and situated phenomena.

The strength of this approach is that it draws together aspects of commemoration and political practice that often slip out of discussions of post-conflict BiH. One of Riding's visits to Sarajevo

coincides with the outbreak of anti-government protests in February 2014, and this acts as a starting point for a discussion of the subsequent Plenum movement where citizen assemblies called for widespread changes to the organisation of the BiH state among other political and social objectives. This is a welcome discussion, though the diary format (written in both past and present tenses) allows the prose a speculative tone that paints a somewhat idealistic image of the possibilities and reach of the Plenum. The subsequent failure of the Plenum movement to achieve traction in changing formal political structures is then rather briefly articulated:

It was too late seemingly, the rage had decreased, and the affective atmosphere of the initial uprising was lost. The revolution is over, long live the revolution. (p. 113)

Considering the desire to break out of the conventional geopolitical image of BiH, Riding could have dedicated space to probing with Plenum participants the reasons for the waning momentum of the movement. The later sentiment that 'Plenum was never envisaged as a way into state politics anyway' (p. 114) seems at odds with the statement earlier that the first demand of the Plenum of Citizens of Sarajevo was 'the establishment of a government of experts' (p. 106). Considering the thread of time and memory that weave through the book, I was wondering what factors led to the erosion of the initial affective atmosphere? How do such shifting political impulses sit alongside accounts of hope and waiting in ethnographic studies of post-conflict environments such as Stef Jansen's (2015) account of life in a Sarajevo apartment block, or Yael Navaro's (2012) exploration of the affective atmospheres of the state in the Turkish republic of Northern Cyprus? Finally, and perhaps most pertinently, how does the failure of the Plenum reflect the increasing flight of young people from BiH as they lament the impossibility of transforming the ethnocratic state?

It is not that the book is without voices. The text is enriched through the accounts of artists, aid workers,

war time refugees, and Plenum participants. Their stories evoke the transitory and fragmented nature of the geopolitics of memory in BiH. Alongside the documenting of everyday life in Sarajevo and reminiscences of travels in the region, these accounts constitute the raw materials of the 'new' forms of geopolitics espoused in the book's later sections. But it is difficult to think of such situated, embodied and everyday geopolitics without also drawing in debates first advocated by feminist political geographers (Dowler and Sharp, 2001). Engagement with feminist approaches would not only have facilitated widening the gaze of 'what counts' as geopolitical landscape, it would also allowed Riding to situate the project in his own political and intellectual journey. We get glimpses of this impulse in the prosaic aspects of his journey (the borrowed Fiat Panda or the poinsettia gift) but a more resolute engagement with the personal motivations and expectations of the project would have given a clearer account of the purpose of the work. A feminist critique would also provide the insight into the differing accounts of the political that infuse the discussions of both Plenum activism and later accounts of the commemoration of the Srebrenica genocide.

In *The Geopolitics of Memory A Journey to Bosnia* Riding is attempting something quite difficult: to write a book about the geopolitics of the recent history of Bosnia and Herzegovina that neither re-treads the steps of previously published works nor romanticises the divisive politics of the present. The eclecticism of the text helps achieve these aims, and the style is unlike any book I have read on BiH. In some senses I was left wondering if an academic book was indeed the appropriate format, or, if it was, could it take an even more radical aesthetic form? It drew to mind the kinds of outputs from the Forensic Architecture project led by Eyal Weizman (2014), where 'findings' are communicated through an

interrelated set of web materials, physical exhibitions and published outputs. Would, for example, a video installation of street life in Sarajevo serve the same purpose as the list of everyday observations? Perhaps this would be one mechanism of extending the art-activism espoused in the penultimate chapter of the book. What would Georges Perec do in 2020?

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